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ABSTRACT

The field of oral interpretation has been influenced by both the analytical approach to literature study, with significant emphasis on understanding the literary text, and the interpersonal approach. While oral reading may utilize various performance arts or media such as dance, music, or film, the most popular movement currently is Readers Theater, one of several forms of group reading. There are no set rules for this type of oral communication, but concentration on interpretation of material and experimentation with a variety of approaches are important. (JM)

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Speech Communication Instruction. Deems H. Brooks, New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1972.

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## RECENT TRENDS IN ORAL INTERPRETATION

### Chloe Armstrong

Before we consider what is new in oral interpretation, it is important to review briefly the history of the discipline. What has evolved in the nature of the study and what methods have been used in the process?

The theories and methods of oral interpretation have been based largely on the idea of better understanding of the literature both for the oral reader and the audience. This idea was true of Socrates when he gave the charge to the rhapsode, Ion. The English elecutionists of the eighteenth century emphasized development of skills and the use of techniques, but they also implied the necessity of knowing the "thought and emotion" of the selection. It was S. S. Curry in the twentieth century who insisted that the oral reader can perform only after thorough understanding of the literary text. But several years later, C. C. Cunningham, who believed in the application of principles of aesthetics to oral interpretation, formulated a comprehensive, detailed aesthetic analysis of literature. This analytical approach had strong influence on study of oral interpretation and is used by many students today.

One of the strongest forces that has been instrumental in bringing about changes in the field has been literary criticism. A close

parallel between these two studies can be traced from Plato to I.A. Richards, the forerunner of the New Criticism, New Literary Criticism, and now, Anti New Library Criticism.

During the last twenty years there has been a significant change in oral reading both in the nature of the discipline and the method of study, but emphasis was definitely on understanding the literary text. Some attention was given to "knowing your audience" but focus was on reader, literature and audience. Little attention was given to the process of the oral performance, or the value or effect the process had upon the reader both in understanding his material and himself as a human being.

In most recent time a few professors, such as Don Geiger, have given a great deal of attention to the process of the oral performance. And Rosanna Herndon in her latest research has contributed additional information on the process of oral performance as interpersonal interpretation.[1]

This shift of interest in oral interpretation is closely related to changes made in oral communication. Linking of these two studies tended toward those fields which are related to the interpersonal encounter. Oral reading of literature is a human interaction process. Interpersonal communication with the audience is extricably bound to the oral interpretation process. The rhetoricians have long recognized the interpersonal confrontation with the audience. The oral interpreter has confrontation with the printed page (the literature) as well as with the listeners. The questions we need to ask are: What effect does this confrontation have on the individual, as well as to others?

The interpersonal approach adapts well for oral performance. A group of individuals may sit around in a classroom, at home, in a social meeting or church activity, reading literature

and discussing their reaction to what is being read and their reactions to each other.[2]

A social reaction of interpersonal communication requires symbolization for clear concept formation. Meaning arises out of social interaction. In the philosophical writings of Kenneth Burke and the more contemporary writing of John Cirardi, there is an underlying assumption, in all the description of ideas of literature, that poetry writing and poetry reading are interpersonal communication processes.

Many different professors are probing into the nature and effects of oral reading. Jere Verilleux, in his study and writings have pointed out the need to understand the unique character of the language of oral interpretation.[3] In another approach in relating interpretation to communication, Paul Campbell has been developing in his writings the idea of aesthetic communication as used by the interpreter. These examples of research with the other studies being done, implies that there is s shift of emphasis that will change some of the concepts and methods of oral interpretation.

The oral reader now is no longer limited primarily to American and English authors for selecting material, but has access to the leading authors of the world. Students and professors are exploring all the different types of literature, such as essay, fable, literary letter, diaries, journals, biographies, for oral performance. Many individuals are returning to the classics, poetic drama and Bibical literature for oral presentations.

Although the use of mixed media is often referred to for group reading, the individual reader ought to feel free to utilize the dance, music, film, or any other art and media that will add to his performance. Oral interpretive Festivals in the different parts of the country include in the program at least one division "Creative Interpretation, Innovative Reading, or Anything Goes."[4]

The most popular movement in oral interpretation at the present time is Readers Theatre. It is impossible to name and define all the various forms of group reading, but naming a few will suffice for this discussion, Theatre Reading, Chamber Reading, Concert Reading, Staged Reading and Readers Theatre. There are many variations in the methods used to present the different types of group reading, but it is generally agreed that the purpose of Readers Theatre is to present good literature in a lively dramatic manner and to make it an exciting experience both for the participants and the members of the audience.

Wallace Bacon referring to difficulty in defining Readers Theatre stated, "...we are more interested in describing possibilities than in prescribing limitations. Definitions are necessary and helpful, but should not be allowed to stand in the way of enjoyment."[5]

Although it is difficult to state exactly what Readers Theatre is, it is fairly well agreed on a few things it is not. (1) It is not play reading. A group of people, sitting around reading a play is an enjoyable experience but it is not Readers Theatre. (2) It is not an easy and inexpensive way to produce a play. (3) It is not a substitute or a rival of drama. There are no set rules for any of the forms of group reading, however there are general principles and suggestions of oral interpretation that apply to individual reading and apply equally to Readers Theatre.

In the past few years there has been an accelerated interest in Readers Theatre and this interest has brought many changes. Questions are being asked such as: Do you read from manuscript or is it permissible to memorize your material? How much movement can one use? Are all scenes focused "off stage" or can one move from "off stage" to "on stage" focus? Do you use costume in Readers Theatre? What theatrical effects

can be used? There are no set inflexible answers to these questions. So much depends upon the nature of the material, the place and purpose of the performance, and most important the experience, knowledge and sensibilities of the director and of the readers. The participants should know the material and apply the suggestions that John Ciardi offered on how to prepare for reading poetry--"enter the poem, live into it, experience it."[6] The readers can concentrate on the interpretation of the material but should never be afraid to experiment with various approaches, and always make it an exciting experience.

Closely associated with Readers Theatre is mixed media presentation. There is a new interest in this approach and a much larger scope of different media to use. Just as in Readers Theatre, we would say there are no hard fast rules but a few questions should be asked. Is the material being used, intensified by use of extra media, or does it distract from the literature? Is the particular media mixing in good taste both for the participants and the audience? Oral interpreters ought to feel free to mix any of the art media but through study and practice be sure to learn to mix them well.

What is new in oral interpretation?

Two basic changes are emerging.

(1) A shift of interest to the process of the oral performances and the relationship of this approach to interpersonal communication.

(2) A broader scope in the use of Readers Theatre--including the use of mixed media.

The field of oral communication is changing, and oral interpretation is a vital part of this change.

## Notes

1 Herndon, Rosanna, "A Symbolic Interactionist Theory of Reader-Poetry Encounter--A Process

Description of the Readers' Interaction With New Poetry." A Ph. D. Dissertation, University of S. Illinois, 1973.

2 This type of interpersonal interpretation has been a part of the Interpretive Reading Theater at Baylor University for several years.

3 Verilleux, Jere, "The Interpreter--The Nature of His Art," Perspectives in Oral Interpretation, ed. by John Gray, Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1968.

4 This type of program is a popular division at Annual Interpretive Reading Festival at North Texas State University under the direction of Ted Colson.

5 Bacon, Wallace, The Art of Interpretation, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972, p. 406.

6 Ibid.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

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Chloe Armstrong has recently retired as Professor of Speech Communication at Baylor University.She now resides in Silver Spring and remains active in both oral interpretation and politics.

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